

The Hard Fight of Cethern

'I see a chariot coming across the plain from the north today,' said Mac Roth, 'and (in the chariot) a grey-haired man, unarmed except for a silver spike which he holds in his hand. It seems as if the mist of May surrounds the chariot. With the spike he pricks both charioteer and horses, for he thinks he will scarcely reach the host alive. Before him runs a brindled hunting-dog.' 'Who is that, Fergus?' asked Ailill. 'Is it likely to be Conchobar or Celtchair?' 'It is not likely,' said Fergus. 'But I think it might be Cethern, the generous, red-sworded son of Fintan.' And so indeed it was.

Then Cethern attacked them throughout the encampment and killed many. And he himself was grievously wounded and came from the fighting to Cú Chulainn, with his entrails lying about his feet. Cú Chulainn had compassion on him for his wounding. 'Get me a physician,' said Cethern to Cú Chulainn. A litter-bed of fresh rushes with a pillow on it was prepared for him. Then Cú Chulainn sent Láeg to Fiacha mac Fir Fhebe in the encampment of the banished Ulstermen to seek physicians, and said that he would kill them all even if they were to take refuge underground in the encampment unless they came to him to cure Cethern. The physicians found this no pleasant prospect for there was none in the camp whom Cethern would not wound. However the physicians came forth to see Cethern. The first physician who came to him examined him.

'You will not live,' said he. 'Neither will you,' said Cethern, and struck him a blow with his fist which caused his brains to gush out over his ears. In the same way he killed fifty physicians, or he killed fifteen of them. The last man received only a glancing blow which caused him to swoon. He was later rescued by Cú Chulainn. They sent messengers then to Fíngin, the seer-physician, Conchobar's own physician, asking him to come and examine Cú Chulainn and Cethern. 'It is not right for you,' said Cú Chulainn to Cethern, 'to kill the physicians. It will not be possible to get any (more) of them to come to you.' 'It was not right for them to give me a bad prognosis.' For each physician who examined him used to say that he would not live, that he was not curable, so then Cethern used to strike him with his fist. They saw Fíngin's chariot approaching, for he had been told that Cú Chulainn and Cethern were in distress. Cú Chulainn went to meet him. 'Examine Cethern for us,' said Cú Chulainn, 'but do so from a distance, for he has killed fifteen of their physicians.' Fíngin came to Cethern. He examined him from afar off.

'Examine me,' said Cethern. 'This first thrust that I received I find painful.' 'Those are wounds inflicted by a proud and foolish woman,' said Fíngin. 'It is likely that it is so,' said Cethern. 'There came to me a tall beautiful woman with pale, tender face and long cheeks. She had long fair hair and two golden birds on her shoulder. She wore a dark purple hooded mantle. On her back she carried a shield five hands in breadth and overlaid with gold. In her hand a javelin, keen, sharp-edged and light. A sword with pointed hilt across her shoulders. Great was her beauty. She it was who first came to me and wounded me.' 'Aye indeed,' said Cú Chulainn. 'That was Medb from Crúachu.' 'These are slight wounds inflicted unwillingly by a kinsman. They will not prove fatal,' said the physician. 'That is so,' said Cethern. 'A warrior came to me. He carried a curved shield with scalloped rim. In his hand a spear with bent point, across his shoulders an ivory-hilted sword. He had a crest of hair and wore a brown cloak in which was a silver pin wrapped about him. He got a

slight wound from me.' 'I know him,' said Cú Chulainn. 'That was Illann, the son of Fergus mac Róig.' 'This is the attack of two warriors,' said the physician. 'That is true,' said Cethern. 'Two men came to me. They bore long shields, each with two hard chains of silver and a silver boss. They had two five-pronged spears round which was a silver ring. They had thick heads of hair and each man wore a necklet of silver.' 'I know them,' said Cú Chulainn. 'Those were Oll and Oichne, the two foster-sons of Ailill and Medb. They never go to an assembly but that they are sure to kill someone. It was they who wounded you.'

'Two other warriors came to me,' said Cethern. 'They had splendid bright equipment and they themselves were manly.' 'I know them,' said Cú Chulainn. 'Those were Bun and Mecon of the king's household.' 'These wounds are grave,' said the physician. 'They have gone right through your heart and pierced it transversely. I cannot undertake to heal them. Yet I have such skill that they may not prove fatal.' 'This is the bloody onset of the two sons of the King of Caill,' said the physician. 'That is true,' said Cethern. 'There came to me two grey-haired warriors, each carrying a wooden vessel on his back. Indeed,' said Cethern, 'this spear pierced one of them.' 'I know them,' said Cú Chulainn. 'They were noble warriors from Medb's great household. They were Bróen and Láiréne, the two sons of three lights, the two sons of the King of Caill.' 'This is the attack of three warriors,' said Fíngin, the physician. 'That is true,' said he. 'There came to me three men of equal size, linked together with a chain of bronze ...' 'Those were the three warriors of Banba, followers of Cú Raí mac Dáire.' 'This is the onset of three champions,' said Fíngin. 'That is true,' said he. 'Three champions came to me bearing the equipment of warriors. Each had a silver chain around his neck and carried a handful of javelins. Each man of them thrust a spear into me, and I thrust this spear into each of them.'

'Those were three of the warriors of Irúath,' said Cú Chulainn. 'For their fierceness they were chosen to kill you,' said the physician. 'Indeed they have severed the sinews of your heart within you so that it rolls about in you like a ball of thread in an empty bag.' 'I cannot cure (you) (?),' said Fíngin. 'This is the attack of three bloody-minded men,' said Fíngin. 'That is so,' said Cethern. 'Three tall stout men came to me. They were inciting me even before they reached me. They had three grey heads of hair.' 'Those were the three stewards of Medb and Ailill, Scenb and Rand and Fodail,' said Cú Chulainn. 'These are three hostile blows,' said Fíngin. 'True,' said Cethern. 'Three warriors came to me. Each had a head of thick black hair and wore a vari-coloured cape. They carried in their hands three iron clubs.' 'Those were the three called Fráech Baíscne, the three tableservants of Medb,' said Cú Chulainn.

'This is the attempt of two brothers,' said Fíngin. 'That is true,' said Cethern. 'There came to me two choice warriors. They wore dark-grey mantles and carried curved shields with scalloped rim. Each had in his hand a broad shining spear on a slender shaft.' 'I know them,' said Cú Chulainn. 'They were Cormac Colomon ind Ríg, and Cormac Maíle Ogath.' 'Numerous indeed are the wounds they both inflicted on you,' said the physician. 'They have pierced your throat and their spears moved about within you.' 'These are the wounds inflicted by two brothers,' said the physician. 'That is likely,' said Cethern. 'Two warriors came to me. One had curling yellow hair, the other curling brown hair. They bore white shields ornamented with animal designs in gold. Each had a white-hilted sword across his shoulder. They wore hooded tunics with red insertion.' 'I know them,' said Cú Chulainn. 'Those were Maine Aithremail and Maine Máithremail.' 'These are the thrusts delivered by father and son,' said the physician. 'That is so,' said Cethern. 'There came to me two huge men with shining eyes, wearing golden diadems on their heads. Each man had at his waist a

golden- hilted sword. Scabbards reaching to the haft of each sword and a ring of variegated gold around each.' 'I know them,' said Cú Chulainn. 'That was Ailill with his son, Maine Condasgeb Uile.' 'What prognosis do you give me, master Fíngin?' asked Cethern.

'In truth,' said Fíngin, 'you should not exchange your grown cows for yearlings now. As long as your attackers were numbered only in twos and threes, it were easy to cure you. But when you bear wounds inflicted by many, you are destined to die in any case,' With that Fíngin turned the chariot away from him. 'You pronounce judgment on me like the rest,' (said Cethern). So he struck Fíngin a blow of his fist so that he fell across the shafts of the chariot and the whole chariot resounded.

Then said Cú Chulainn 'That is a wicked kick of yours for an old man (?).' Hence is still the name Ú;achtar Lúa in Crích Rois. 'You should have attacked enemies rather than physicians,' said Cú Chulainn. Then the physician Fíngin offered Cethern a choice: either to lie sick for a year and then survive, or straightaway to have sufficient strength for three days and three nights to attack his enemies. The latter is what Cethern chose. Then Cú Chulainn asked for marrow for the physician to cure Cethern. He made a marrow-mash from the bones of the cattle he encountered. Hence the name Smirommair in Crích Rois. After absorbing the marrow, Cethern slept for a day and a night. 'I have no ribs,' complained Cethern. 'Put the ribs of the chariot frame in me.' 'You shall have that,' said Cú Chulainn. 'If I had my own weapons,' said Cethern, 'the deeds I should perform would be remembered for ever.' 'What I see now seems fine,' said Cú Chulainn. 'What do you see?' asked Cethern. 'I think it is the chariot of your wife Find Bee, the daughter of Eochu, coming towards us.'

They saw the woman bringing Cethern's weapons in the chariot. Cethern seized his weapons and attacked the host then with the framework of his chariot bound to his belly to give him more strength. That physician, who had escaped from Cethern and lain unconscious among the corpses of the other physicians now carried a warning of Cethern's arrival into the encampment. Then through fear of Cethern, Ailill's crown was put upon the pillar-stone. Cethern rushed at the pillar-stone and drove his sword through it and his fist after the sword. Hence the place-name Lia Toll in Crích Rois. 'This is a trick!' he cried. 'I shall not cease to attack you until I see this diadem of Ailill on one of you.' Then for a day and a night he attacked them, until Maine put the diadem on his head and came forward in his chariot. Cethern threw after Maine his shield which split him and his charioteer and went right through the horses into the ground. Then the host hemmed Cethern in on all sides and he attacked them and fell dead among them so doing.

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